

Summary of Act IV of Hamlet

Scene I

Claudius runs to the aid of a disturbed Gertude and learns Prince Hamlet has apparently gone mad and killed Polonius. Aware that it might have been him behind the curtain, Claudius realizes he must take action and decides to send Hamlet to England. Claudius then calls for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to search for Hamlet and find the whereabouts of Polonius' body. After the two have left, Claudius speaks to Gertude, telling her he will hold a council meeting to suppress any rumors of Polonius' death.

Scene II

After successfully hiding Polonius' body, Hamlet hears Rosencrantz and Guildenstern calling him. He responds to their question regarding Polonius' body with sarcastic remarks and agrees to see the king.

Scene III

The scene opens as Claudius speaks to his advisors of Hamlet's current state and concludes that he must take action against Hamlet. They decide to send Hamlet to England and make it appear to the public as a planned project because of Hamlet's popularity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern then arrive with Hamlet and tell Claudius how Hamlet refuses to tell them the whereabouts of Polonius' body. The King then begins to interrogate Hamlet about Polonius and Hamlet again replies with sarcastic remarks. The King now informs Hamlet that he is being sent to England and Hamlet mockingly agrees. Claudius then orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to make preparations at top speed to send Hamlet away. Claudius now alone, reveals he wants Hamlet put to death upon his arrival in England, until then he will not have peace.

Scene IV

Fortinbras returns and the reader learn he has come to Denmark to ask permission from the King to march through Denmark. Aside, Hamlet questions the captain of the Norwegian army and discovers they are about to fight over a worthless piece of land. Hamlet reflects on this idea and compares himself to Fortinbras. Fortinbras is willing to fight over a small piece of land in the name of honor, while Hamlet has all the justification in the world to revenge his fathers death, but is still reluctant to do so. Hamlet decides to take action and revenge his father's death and boards the ship to England.

Scene V

Horatio, seeing Ophelia has gone mad pleads with Gertude to speak to her. Gertude declines at first, but agrees after considering the threat of suspicion among the townspeople. When Ophelia enters it is clear to the audience that she has gone insane. The King also observes Ophelia's condition as he try to speak to her and concludes her madness stems from her father's death and asks Horatio to look after her. Claudius then goes on to discuss with Gertude the sorrows for the royal family: Polonius' death; Hamlet's forced exile; rumor and distrust among the public due to the secrecy surrounding Polonius' death and burial; Ophelia's madness; and finally, the secret return of Laertes who is accusing Claudius of his father's death.

Laertes and a mob burst into the castle chanting Laertes as the future king. Laertes speaks to the King demanding his father but Claudius shows a kingly calm. Laertes then vows revenge, and Claudius responds asking whether he would take revenge on a friend or enemy. Laertes answers against an enemy, and Claudius uses this moment to inform Laertes that he had no part in Polonius' death, but actually grieved greatly. Ophelia then interrupts the two and seeing the condition of his sister (her madness) fuels Laertes' revenge. Claudius agrees to go in front of a panel of judges to determine if he is guilty in the matter of Polonius' death, and if not promises to punish the guilty.

Scene VI

Horatio receives a letter from his friend Hamlet telling him that with a twist of fate, pirates have attacked Hamlet's ship and he is held captive aboard the pirates' ship. He tells Horatio that he has been well-treated and promised the pirates a favor once they get him back to Denmark. He encloses a letter for Claudius, and asks Horatio to hurry to him and because he has much to discuss with him. Horatio then goes off to find his friend.

Scene VII

Meanwhile, Claudius tells Laertes that Hamlet killed his father, and gives Laertes two reasons for not taking action against Hamlet. One reason he explains, is that Gertrude adores her son, second, the public also reveres Hamlet and attacks on him turn against the attacker. He promises Laertes that he will not let Hamlet get away with this deed. Just then a messenger arrives with Hamlet's letters for the King and the Queen. The letter basically tells the King that Hamlet is back in Denmark. This puzzles the King, but Laertes is delighted because it allows him to take his revenge against Hamlet. Immediately the King plots against Hamlet and finds there is a rivalry between Hamlet and Laertes because once a gentleman praised Laertes' skill at swordsmanship. The King arranges a challenge between the two, but supposedly using covered points. Laertes will choose the one sword with an uncovered point with which he will stab Hamlet. Laertes goes further: he decides to dip the tip of his sword in a deadly poison so the slightest scratch will kill Hamlet. Claudius determined to kill Hamlet, has a back-up plan, and plans to poison Hamlet's wine when Claudius proposes a toast.

Their plotting is interrupted when Gertrude comes to inform them that Ophelia is dead. She explains that while Ophelia was hanging garlands on the limbs of a tree, the limb broke and she fell into the stream. She allowed herself to be carried away with the current and eventually drowned. Laertes is unable to control his grief and storms off. Claudius hurries after him to control Laertes' rage.